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Contradictions in Kim's Supervenience Argument

In this section I will consider a possible objection to the reasoning in Jaegwon Kim's Problem of Causal Exclusion. The objection rests on the claim that Kim's reasoning when motivating the Problem of Causal Exclusion has an internal contradiction that threatens the foundations of the problem he is attempting to raise for mental causation.

Recall that an early step in Kim's formulation of the Problem of Causal Exclusion was the claim that a physical property p without its supervening mental property m is causally sufficient to bring about its resulting physical effect p*. Kim uses this sufficiency of the physical property p to argue that p's supervening mental property m is causally inert with respect to p* (due to his arguments against the overdetermination of p* by p and m). Kim invites his readers to inquire whether m would have a claim as a cause of p* given that p alone (without m) would be causally sufficient for p* to occur. Given the resulting overdetermination problems that occur were one to posit that p is not sufficient for p* but rather requires the

presence of the supervening mental property, Kim argues that it is only p that has a genuine claim as a sufficient cause of p*. In addition, to deny this would be to deny the causal closure of the physical domain, which would be an unacceptable consequence and would be a return to the interaction problems associated with mind/body dualism.

As is seen in the above paraphrase of Kim's reasoning, a crucial step in Kim's formulation of the Problem of Causal Exclusion in the Supervenience Argument is his claim that p alone, without m, is causally sufficient to bring about the physical effect p*. One might object to Kim's formulation here with the claim that Kim's consideration of p alone, without m, contradicts his strong reliance on the supervenience relation between p and m. If the relation between p and m is genuinely one of supervenience, then the mental property m is a necessary consequence of its supervenience base p. In other words, whenever p is instantiated (whether p is a simple physical property or a complex set of physical properties, as Karen Bennett holds), m must necessarily be instantiated also. Were this not the case, the supervenience relation would simply fail to hold between p and m, which would undermine the force of the Supervenience Argument for the Problem of Causal

Exclusion. Given this tight connection between p and m, one might object to Kim's argument that the very notion of p alone, sans m, is incoherent with the requirement that m supervenes on p.

The central worry behind this objection is that the very concept of a physical supervenience base alone without its supervening mental property cannot be entertained free of contradiction. One could, of course, appeal to Bennett's insight that a simple property p cannot properly be thought to be sufficient to instantiate a mental property (in favor of a complex conjunction of many physical properties). Using this strategy, one could attempt to avoid the problem just raised by claiming that it does in fact make sense to consider p alone due to the fact that p must be conjoined with other physical properties in order for m to be instantiated.

Two difficulties arise with this proposed response to the objection I just raised, however. First, Kim's reasoning is dependent upon the claim that p *is* in fact sufficient for m to be instantiated. Whether p stands for a simple property or for the set of properties suggested by Bennett makes no difference to Kim's reasoning. Kim's argument is in fact neutral with respect to the exact

nature of the physical supervenience base p, so long as p is sufficient to guarantee m. If p, as a simple physical property, is unable to count as sufficient for the mental property m, then p must be considered to be a complex set of properties. But the same objection could then be raised about the necessity relation between the complex property p and m and the resulting tension when considering p alone without its supervening mental property.

The second difficulty with this strategy is that the claim that p alone is insufficient for m (in favor of p being a complex set of properties) would also threaten the tight connection between the physical cause p and the resulting physical effect p*. If p alone were insufficient for m to be instantiated, one could equally claim that p alone would be insufficient for the resulting physical effect p* to be instantiated. Not only would this suggestion, then, undermine the supervenience relation between p and m, but it would also threaten the causal sufficiency for p in bringing about the resulting physical effect p* in question. It must be concluded, then, that appealing to the causal insufficiency of p in favor of a more complex supervenience base is inadequate as a response to the objection I am raising here to Kim’s reasoning in

his Supervenience Argument for the Problem of Causal Exclusion.

Another possible reply to the objection I am raising is that the presence of a relationship of necessity between two properties does not prohibit consideration of those properties independently. Take an ordinary conditional statement "A implies B"; or better still a modal statement "A necessarily implies B." Assuming that A and B are not numerically identical (in other words, assuming that A and B are distinct from one another) the presence of a tight connection between A and B does not prohibit the consideration of either A or B independently or individually. It is true that B is a consequence of A, but A is still a distinct statement (or event, or property) with its own nature. As such it does appear to be possible that A can be considered in isolation, even though B may in fact be a necessary consequence of A.

Applying this reasoning to the objection against Kim's consideration of p alone, without the supervening mental property m, it follows that the tight relationship between p and m via the supervenience relation does not preclude consideration of p and m, qua independent entities. It must be recalled that Kim is dealing with *non-reductive*

physicalism, in which m is irreducible with respect to p. This irreducibility means that m and p are, by definition, distinct properties (or entities, if one prefers). It is true that there is a tight connection between m and p, but the irreducibility of m to p allows the two properties to be recognized as genuinely distinct properties, although they may be inseparably conjoined by necessity.

A proponent of the objection I am raising to Kim's reasoning here might reply to the above paragraph with the claim that despite the irreducibility of m to p, it is still incoherent to consider p alone without m, since it is, by definition, impossible for p ever to occur without m, as required by the supervenience relation. Since p can never possibly occur without m (this is somewhat ambiguous, due to the ambiguity and potential conflation of logical possibility, metaphysical possibility, and physical possibility), one might argue that it still makes no sense to consider p alone as a cause of p* since p could never actually be alone without m tagging along as a necessary consequence.

Despite the reasoning in the previous paragraph, however, I argue that the impossibility of p's occurring without m does not directly contradict the claim that p

alone is sufficient for both the physical effect p* and the supervening mental property m. A simple example will suffice to make this point clear. Suppose a white cue ball on a billiard table strikes two other balls (say, a red ball and a green ball) simultaneously. The white ball causes each of the other two balls to move in opposite directions towards two different corner pockets. The white ball striking the red ball is sufficient to cause the red ball to move, and the white ball is also sufficient to cause the green ball to move. The motion of the red ball and the motion of the green ball may be considered to be necessary consequences of a single cause, the motion of the white cue ball. Despite the necessity of the motion of the red ball from the motion of the white ball, one is still able to consider the motion of the white ball in isolation as the sole sufficient cause of the motion of the green ball in the opposite direction. One is not forced in this example to conclude that the motion of the white cue ball in isolation is an incoherent notion from the mere fact that its motion has multiple necessary consequences stemming from that motion.

The relation of physical property p to its supervening mental property m and to its resulting physical effect p*

is analogous to the above billiard table example. Just as the white cue ball's motion is considered to be the sole sufficient cause of the motion of the other two billiard balls, the physical property p has two necessary consequences stemming from itself. The physical property p is sufficient to guarantee the instantiation of mental property m, as required by the stipulation of the supervenience relation between m and p. Physical property p is also sufficient to bring about p* by the necessity relationship of causality, as required by the stipulation of the causal closure of the physical domain. These may be considered to be two distinct relations of necessity, just as in the case of the motion of the red and green billiard balls from the motion of the single white cue ball, which is the sole cause in question. From this it can be learned that the presence of multiple necessity relations stemming from a single sufficient cause does not threaten that cause's claim as the *sole* cause of both consequents. It matters little whether the necessity relations in question are relations of supervenience or relations of causality proper. Whether the consequents of the necessity relations are causal or supervenient, it is still the single

sufficient property that is doing all the proverbial work in bringing about both resultants.

The reasoning in the above paragraph clearly shows that our initial worry, i.e. that the notion of p alone is inconsistent with its stipulation as a supervenience base to m, is unfounded. The physical property p may always have multiple consequents due to its role as a supervenience base for m, but this does not preclude the possibility that it is p alone that is causally sufficient for bringing about further physical effects such as p*. To conceive of p as playing this dual role, as a supervenience base to m and as a cause of p*, is certainly not an outright contradiction as a proponent of the original objection in this section would hold. This is not to claim that there are not further problems to be considered with Kim's reasoning in the Supervenience Argument for the Problem of Causal Exclusion, but this particular worry does not hold up under scrutiny.